

THE WHITE LORD OF KRISHNABAD

PERHAPS Govind Mitra, the old Brahmin, can explain this matter, but it remains incomprehensible to the former Miss Carlton of Baltimore, to her traveling companion, Mrs. Banks, and also to Spencer, at one time American Vice-Consul at Bombay. It began shortly after Miss Carlton had landed on "India's mystic shore." Being in need of assistance she naturally sought the American Consulate. There a portly *babu* (clerk) conducted her to the airy office of Spencer, the young Vice-Consul, to whose duties was attached that of straightening out the difficulties of his traveling fellow citizens.

"Mr. Spencer, I believe," began Miss Carlton.

Spencer bowed and invited the two ladies to comfortable cane chairs. Then he smiled pleasantly, for it was some time since such a typically fresh American girl had crossed the threshold of his office. Subconsciously she recalled to mind an Easter parade on Fifth Avenue, which was far removed from the pale if not sallow procession of faces he met nightly at the band stand. One hot season in the plains will fade the rose tints from any complexion. Therefore he was all desire to assist her in recovering lost baggage, negotiating a draft, or any one of the usual tribulations of tourists.

"Now, what is it I can do for you?" he requested.

"Well," she explained, "it is not a very difficult matter. We wish to visit Krishnabad, and we have been told that as it is a native state it would be advisable to

obtain a letter of introduction from our consul to the Raja. We should then be given better attention."

"Krishnabad!" vaguely repeated Spencer. "Krishnabad! Pardon me, but may I ask why you wish to visit Krishnabad?"

"Is it not an interesting place?"

"Why, from what I have heard I should say it was rather the reverse. You see, Krishnabad lies away off the main line of travel in the Indian Desert. I guess it may possess the average temple and palace attractions, but you can undoubtedly see much finer at Jeypur and Agra without encountering so much physical discomfort. I am afraid you would find the accommodation for travelers at Krishnabad pretty much in the nature of roughing it."

She shot at him a challenging smile from under the broad brim of her hat.

"I can assure you we don't expect to find a Grand Hotel at Krishnabad," she remarked. "Besides I have roughed it before in our West."

"I understand," he inclined his head slightly, as he observed the athletic pose of her figure. "For all that I should advise you to cut out Krishnabad. It really isn't worth the extra discomfort, unless you have some special reason for visiting it."

Miss Carlton turned her eyes toward her companion, exchanged a mute signal, and nodded.

"Well, we have a particular reason. We wish to see the Greco-Buddhist rock sculptures at Krishnabad. I have made a study of Greek sculptures and would like to trace its influence on Hindu art. Have you not heard of the rock sculptures at Krishnabad?"

Spencer's brow grew a trifle puzzled. He certainly

had never heard of the rock sculptures of Krishnabad, but hesitated to display his ignorance before a fellow countrywoman who had just set foot in a land upon which he was presumed to be well informed. Had she tackled him on indigo or rice the case would have been different, but rock sculptures do not figure conspicuously in consular reports. He reached for a bulky volume of indexed general data on India, and turned up Greco-Buddhist sculptures. He found it was quite a lengthy subject, that there were fine collections of Greco-Buddhist relics in the museums of Lahore and Calcutta, and that among the places where such had been discovered those of Krishnabad were disputed. Fortified by this authority he ventured to suggest how much better it would be to look over the relics in the museums.

"But, persisted Miss Carlton, "it is to satisfy ourselves on the disputed point that we wish to visit Krishnabad. We believe that as Krishnabad lay in the path of the Greek invasion it is more than probable the rock sculptures there are of that origin."

Spencer felt that his most attractive young visitor was far too well posted on ancient history as applied to rock sculptures for him to prolong the contest with much hope of success. Still, without any definite reason, other perhaps than the remoteness and discomfort of Krishnabad, he was adverse to their plan. He was trying to think of some other point to urge when, glancing over his shoulder, he caught sight of a native clerk standing in an aperture with reed screen drawn partly aside.

"What do you want?" he demanded, tersely.

"Did not the consul sahib call?" the Native questioned.

"You know I didn't," retorted Spencer. "Jao!" (Be off!)

The Native slipped away and Spencer turned again to his visitors.

"You never can tell what these people are up to," he remarked. "Night and day they are always within earshot. But to come back to your trip to Krishnabad."

"Of course," said Miss Carleton, in a decisive manner. "If you do not care to give us the letter we must manage without it, as we intend to go to Krishnabad."

Spencer sat back in his chair before replying. Somehow he was against their visiting Krishnabad, but he understood the character of his countrywomen sufficiently to know that the reason for drawing them from a set purpose must be a stronger one than mere physical discomfort. And in this case he was not in possession of any serious deterrent facts. The district of Krishnabad was in a fairly pacific condition, and American women had traveled in safety to far more remote places. But premonitions seem to float in the Indian atmosphere.

"Well," he said, at last, "of course you shall have the letter. I guess there is no reason why you should not go to Krishnabad."

So he wrote the letter on official note paper, requesting the far-famed hospitality and courtesy of his Highness, the Raja, on behalf of Miss Carlton and her traveling companion. In reality this merely signified the privilege to view such sights as there might be in Krishnabad, and to pay for the best accommodation obtainable.

"It's just as well to be careful," he remarked, as he

handed Miss Carlton the letter. "I have not heard of any political unrest in Krishnabad, but I wouldn't stay there longer than necessary. It's a bit out of the way, you see, with the nearest British official at some distance. Suppose you wire me when you leave so that I may know you are all right."

"Oh, we can take care of ourselves," replied Miss Carlton confidently.

"Yes, I know, but I'd like to have your decision on the—er—the Greco—"

"Buddhist," she added.

"Yes, Buddhist-Greco sculptures."

Miss Carlton smiled at his hazy inversion of the term, and promised to wire their opinion.

"By the way," he asked, "have you a trustworthy servant?"

"Oh, yes, I think so. We have secured one who has given satisfaction to some other American tourists."

"Good! And be sure you take plenty of wraps along. It gets pretty cold at night in January up country."

Miss Carlton and her companion had risen to leave when Spencer was prompted to offer a souvenir of their call at the consulate. As he rose also, he put out his hand and took from his desk a miniature gilded stone image with the body of a man and the head of an elephant. He offered it to Miss Carlton.

"As you are interested in sculptures please accept this as a talisman of good luck."

"What a queer little figure!" she exclaimed, evidently pleased with the gift. "Thank you so much."

"Not at all," he protested. "I don't know much about it, except that it's called Ganesha. It was given to me by an old Brahmin, Govind Mitra, in return for

getting his son out of some trouble. I believe the image is held to possess some mysterious influence. In this case let us hope it will help you to a pleasant trip through India, and a safe return to the United States. Good-by," he shook hands, "and don't forget to wire me in a few days when you leave Krishnabad."

He watched the retreating forms of Miss Carlton and her companion with head bent pensively and hands thrust deep in his pockets.

"Couldn't prevent their going to that place," he spoke to himself. "Neither is there any definite reason against it, but—somehow—I'd just as soon they had decided to cut out Krishnabad."

From Bombay north to Rampur Junction there is nothing to be said of Miss Carlton's trip, except that if Indian main line passenger comforts are not what they might be, they are a wonderful improvement on conditions not so long past. Peradventure some day you will not have to carry your bedding along, and dining cars will be a reality. But from Rampur Junction on into the Indian Desert by a branch line Spencer's prophecy of roughing it began to be fulfilled. Hour after hour the cars jolted and bumped over an arid plain, dust sifted in through the rattling windows, while the tinted panes gave to the parched landscape a sub-arctic appearance not in keeping with the noonday temperature.

At long intervals the train crawled into wayside stations, and then there was a riot of color and tongues. The third class became the object of attack by fierce-whiskered, swashbuckling-looking fellows, in brilliant turbans, fat white-robed babus, and lean hungry-appearing peasants, whose spindle props of limbs seemed

incapable of supporting the light burden of their possessions. When the train moved on women screamed, children yelled, dogs howled, and frightful maledictions rose from the throats of those for whom there was apparently no room on the "tee-rain." Miss Carlton and her companion felt sure the next one would be carried by assault, but where the people came from, or what they subsisted on, in that inhospitable region, remained to occupy their attention in an otherwise tedious journey.

At last toward sunset the train jolted into the station of Krishnabad. On alighting, the two Americans women could see along a white stretch of sandy road for perhaps a mile to a collection of white-washed mud dwellings backed up against the foot of a precipitous rock. Perched on the rock, and viewing the plain with defiance, the age-worn battlements of the palace stood out against the pale blue sky. Mud dwellings, rock, and palace were all bathed a golden rose as the red ball of the sun drew near the horizon.

They had telegraphed ahead for accommodation at the dak bungalow (traveler's rest), and a hack in the shape of a queer two-wheeled cart with faded embroidered curtains and a gilt fringed canopy was waiting. Such style as it had formerly possessed was further diminished by its being attached for the most part with string to an unkempt pony. As there remained time before darkness set in for a first glimpse of the rock sculptures, Miss Carlton gave directions to be taken to that spot. They had struggled into the body of the cart, but the driver seemed to hesitate before climbing to his perch just over the horse's tail.

"What are you waiting for?" demanded Miss Carlton.

"Mem sahib," replied the driver. "It is for the White Lord."

"What White Lord?" questioned Miss Carlton, glancing around. "I don't see any white man."

"Neither do I," acquiesced her companion.

"Go on at once," ordered Miss Carlton, "No other white person got off the train with us."

The driver grunted as he whipped up the pony, dis-entangled his outfit from a string of camels, and plunged into a whirling cloud of dust. When they shook off the dust cloud they had drawn near to the towering rock now suffused a deep purple with the rapidly changing shades of oncoming night. Presently the driver pulled up before the sculptured façade of a rock temple, its interior of massive columns sinking away into the obscurity of darkness. The sculptures of the façade looked down fantastically, among them figures of Ganesha, the elephant divinity. Whether Ganesha would have decided the question of Greco-Buddhist origin to Miss Carlton's satisfaction must be left doubtful, for the driver protested that the place was haunted by evil spirits after dark and even the unkempt pony seemed nervous. By daylight and with a guide provided by the Raja's courtesy the sculptures could be examined more thoroughly. But Ganesha was working along different lines, as was to be proved by daylight. In the meantime the cart had been driven off at a rattling pace. Skirting the city, enveloped in the pungent smoke and chill blue mist of nightfall, the cart was finally jerked into a flagged courtyard, about whose sides were grouped ruinous buildings which seemed of vast extent.

"What place is this?" questioned Miss Carlton, surveying the scene with wonder mixed with uncertainty.

"This, mem sahib, is the dak bungalow. It was once a palace, so your ladyships will be very comfortable here."

Then he went and banged on a door, while Miss Carlton and her companion expressed their doubt about the promise of comfort. At any rate the American ladyships did not feel inclined to apply the term cozy to a few acres of crumbling walls and roofs. Presently the door was opened by the khansamah (keeper), a tottering gray-bearded old man, holding a lantern. He led his guests into the great hall which had probably been at one time an audience chamber. But a table and chairs in the center had transformed it into about as appropriate a dining room for lone travelers as the Concourse of the Grand Central, minus the illuminations. Adjoining this the khansamah pointed out another cavern-like chamber for a sleeping-room, with more halls leading into black uncertainty beyond. By daylight the ornate roof carving might have been a subject for admiration, but with the chill air drifting in through the delicate marble fretwork of the windows, to cast dancing shadows from spluttering candles, the place seemed to possess a mausoleum atmosphere. It was then the discovery was made that the faithful manservant had disappeared, had in fact not been seen since they left the railway station.

"Well, we have plenty of room at any rate," remarked Miss Carlton, with an effort to be cheerful.

"I hope we shall not be compelled to spend another night in this place," replied Mrs. Banks with a shiver.

The actions of the old khansamah next drew their attention. In laying the table he had set three places.

"You have some one else staying here, then?" interrogated Miss Carlton.

The old man raised his bushy eyebrows in mild surprise.

"For the White Lord, mem sahib."

"The White Lord! What White Lord?" she further questioned, as she recalled the incident on leaving the railway station.

But the khansamah's English could not apparently run to further explanation. Muttering in an undertone he tottered away into the unknown for the supper dishes. Miss Carlton and her companion stared at each other.

"The White Lord, whoever he is, seems to be a very intangible kind of person," remarked Miss Carlton.

Mrs. Banks surveyed the illimitable dark spaces askance.

"I am beginning to think," she said, "that young Mr. Spencer was right when he advised us not to come here. I really wish we had gone on to Jeypur instead."

"Then we should have missed a real touch of Indian atmosphere," returned Miss Carlton. "It isn't every tourist that can say she has slept in a Hindu palace."

Mrs. Banks looked as if she would much rather forego the privilege.

Presently the khansamah re-entered with the inevitable fowl, and an insipid vegetable supposed to be specially tasteful to the Anglo-Saxon palate. The two women watched curiously for the appearance of the White Lord, but if visible to the khansamah he was not so to the other guests. At any rate he did not seem to appreciate the fare which remained untouched on his plate.

"I suppose he must be a ghost," said Miss Carlton, when the two women had retired to their sleeping apartment. "Don't you remember some one on the steamer told us every dak bungalow had its particular ghost."

"My dear girl," protested Mrs. Banks. "How can you suggest such a thing?"

"Well, if we must associate with a ghost," responded Miss Carlton, "I'm glad he is one of our own race, and seems to be a gentleman from the respect paid to him. But I'm really curious about the White Lord. What did he do, or what happened during his life, to send him to meet travelers at the railway station, and to dine with them afterwards in silent and invisible state?"

Mrs. Banks was clearly adverse to discussing the subject. From an intelligent point of view she did not believe in ghosts, but if she could have done so there would certainly have been no more likely spot for a manifestation than the chill and gloomy halls of a Hindu palace given over to the entirely too spacious requirements of a traveler's rest.

But the two women soon discovered that rest was not to be won easily in spite of their fatigue. As it was a case of camping on the cane settees which served the purpose of beds, and the damp air from without grew hourly colder, they decided to maintain their traveling costumes. When the shuffling of the old khansamah's feet died away, an appalling stillness succeeded. The slightest sound was magnified a hundred fold. It seemed possible to hear the very air drifting in through the fretwork tracery of the windows. Imagination began to play upon the scene, and to picture what might have been, what might still be in the adjacent halls and galleries bathed in impenetrable blackness. Was that the

patter of rain drops? No, it was a clear night. Did not that sound like the echo of a door slammed to by a gust of wind? There was no current of air of such violence stirring. To divert their minds from such restless thoughts, the two women made an effort to discuss their main object in Krishnabad, but their voices returned upon their ears with a disturbing effect. A jackal that came and howled in the courtyard touched a note of reality that was almost reassuring. The cry of the beast was in a sense a human contrast to those silent whispering walls, and possibly had some influence upon their finally dropping into sleep. Then it was oblivion, until both women started up suddenly to stare in mutual wonder upon the form of Spencer, the young vice-consul.

"Why!—Good Heavens!—How?"—began Miss Carlton with newly awakened vagueness.

The figure made a gesture of silence, and moving a few steps, turned and beckoned the two women to follow.

As they rose they glanced into the audience hall which had served the purpose of their dining-room, and beheld a scene which boded ill for their safety. Three dark figures, nude to the waist, with shaven heads, top-knots looped over their ears, and caste marks on their foreheads which gave to their features a demoniacal expression, had seized and apparently gagged the old khansamah. While one of the men stood aside with a strip of cloth in his hand, the other two were engaged in binding the old khansamah to the table with his turban. No words were spoken, but the silence and swift-ness of their actions were eloquent.

The two women were hesitating over what course to adopt, when the impatient gestures, and earnest, almost

pleading expression on the young vice-consul's face formed their decision. The peril was evidently of a nature to hasten from. So they stole noiselessly but quickly after him into the unknown recess of the palace. But at any rate it seemed familiar to Spencer. After twisting in and out through halls and passages, he led them through a tangled weed-grown garden to a ruined gate. Then they found themselves on the highroad leading to the railway station. Spencer kept on ahead with a pale yellow moon lighting their path. They seemed to pass over the level stretch of sand at a faster pace than they had traversed it some hours before in the cart, and reached the railway station feeling they had escaped from a danger made twice awesome by being unknown to all former experience. Their eyes fell upon the glint of the steel rails as a security binding them to their own civilization. Then they sank down on a bench to wonder vaguely what had become of the young vice-consul, who, after reaching the station, had disappeared.

An hour later when the Native station master came to open his office for an early morning train, he seemed to regard it as nothing strange that two mem sahibs should be seated close together on the platform bench. Their usual ways were so far beyond his comprehension, that where their customary habits began or ended was hardly worth consideration.

At last in the gray blue tint of early dawn the headlights of a train gleamed in the distance, shone too in the mem sahib's spirits. It wasn't likely to prove much of a train, but any string of cars jerked along by a locomotive was better than a Hindu palace masquerading as a traveler's rest. Presently it rumbled into

the station, Miss Carlton and her companion luckily found a vacant compartment, and before the crawling pace of full speed was attained, had cast themselves on to the leather bunks in a state of exhaustion. When they awoke, the train had left Krishnabad many hours behind, and they were again approaching Rampur Junction. By the time they had made the best toilette at command, the train had pulled into the station. On stepping to the platform almost the first person on whom their eyes fell was Spencer. At first glance his features seemed to wear an anxious expression, but on recognizing them it changed spontaneously to relief.

"Well," he exclaimed, "I'm mighty glad to see you've got away all right from Krishnabad."

Miss Carlton returned his look with one of feeling.

"You cannot imagine how grateful we are to you for our escape," she said. "But for you we cannot think what might have happened, though it's a puzzle to know what became of you after reaching the Krishnabad railway station. We did not see you board the train."

"Grateful to me for your escape!" exclaimed Spencer. "Krishnabad station! Why, I have never been at Krishnabad station in my life."

Miss Carlton stared from Spencer's face to that of her companion in wonder.

"Not at the Krishnabad station?" she repeated. "Then do you mean to say you did not help us to escape from that horrible dak bungalow?"

Spencer looked as much surprised as his two fellow countrywomen.

"I can only say," he went on, "that I have never set foot in Krishnabad, though I'll admit I was headed there now as fast as I could travel, on your account."

"Well," gasped Miss Carlton. "I simply don't know what to make of it."

"The fact is," explained Spencer, "after you left Bombay, that old Brahmin I spoke of, Govind Mitra, turned up. He seemed to know I had given you the little image of Ganesha, and of your trip to Krishnabad. Whether he got all that from one of my clerks, I can't say, but anyway he warned me you would encounter great danger from a band of Dacoits recently formed in Krishnabad. They make it part of a religious code to prey upon travelers. Naturally I was frightfully anxious. As the chance of reaching you with a telegram in a Native state was doubtful, I did the best thing I could think of by coming on myself."

"And do you mean to say," persisted Miss Carlton, "that you did not show us the way out of that half-ruined palace, when—when the Dacoits—I suppose that is what they were—had attacked the old keeper?"

Spencer shook his head as he led them toward the refreshment room.

"No, though I might wish to have done so, I can certainly prove an alibi. At the time, I was coming up from Bombay in the train, and there were a couple of men I know well in my compartment. But as I said before I was frightfully anxious on your account. Now I think of it, though, old Govind Mitra insisted on giving me another of those weird little images and said he would do something in the way of a warning that was better than our wire messages. I didn't of course set any faith in him, but Govind Mitra does seem to know things, and he may have had something to do with your fortunate illusion. But there's the tiffin bell, which is now the thing of importance."

Over tiffin Miss Carlton related their adventure in detail, being still unable to satisfy herself regarding Spencer's part.

"Well," he asked. "Have you still got that little image?"

"Oh, yes," she replied, producing and setting it on the table. "I must have snatched up my hand bag when we ran from the dak bungalow. Fortunately, too, we had left most of our baggage at the station."

"And here is mine," he said, placing his beside hers. "Now, it seems to me," he added, regarding her with an earnest look, "that we ought to go back to Bombay and ask Govind Mitra what the pair signify. He's a wonderfully wise old chap, is Govind Mitra. Besides, I've found out there are rock sculptures down there away ahead of those at Krishnabad. What do you say?"

He seemed to hang on her answer with quite intense interest. Miss Carlton glanced toward her companion and apparently gathered encouragement.

"Yes," she nodded. "I—I think it would be a good plan to follow your suggestion. Besides, I am curious to meet Govind Mitra."

"Good!" ejaculated Spencer. "There's the down mail coming in now. Let's go and hunt up Govind Mitra."